

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
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Government Island
Name of property
Stafford County, Virginia
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SITE DESCRIPTION

In an 1805 report on the public buildings being constructed in Washington, D.C., Benjamin Henry Latrobe, surveyor of public buildings, described the sandstone resources on what has eventually become known as Government Island. He wrote:

The freestone of Acquia used in the public buildings is a calcareous sandstone of very excellent quality, and the quarries are in appearance inexhaustible. It is however subject to clayholes, to nodules of iron ore (pyrites) and to masses of flint, and the hardness and durability of the rock is often very various, in the same stratum. It also suffers expansion and contraction from moisture and dryness to as greater degree than any stone with which I am acquainted. Even after a block is taken out of the quarry, and delivered in the City, and in some cases after it has been wrought, it is liable to fly to pieces, if rapidly dried by violent heat or wind. But if it once becomes dry, and remains sound, it has never been known afterwards to fail.¹

Once a plentiful source of quality sandstone, this site currently contains only the remnants and reminders of a former prosperous quarry used by the federal government and others as a building material in the White House, United States Capitol, and other prominent buildings throughout the region.

Government Island is located in a portion of Aquia Creek in the northern section of Stafford County approximately four miles southeast of the intersection of Jefferson Davis Highway (U.S. Route 1) and Garrisonville Road (State Route 610), which is also the location of Interstate 95 Interchange 143, Garrisonville/Aquia. The Aquia Harbour subdivision, which owns the land on the western side of Government Island, provides limited access to the island. Aquia Creek borders Government Island to the north, east, and south creating more of a peninsula rather than a true island. Aquia Creek itself, is a tributary of the Potomac River, with a distance to Washington, D.C. via the Potomac River measuring approximately 40 miles.

Government Island is a vacant property that has remained as such since quarry operations ceased in the 1820s. The entire island, minus a one-acre tract owned by the Stafford County Boy Scouts, has been under the ownership of the Stafford County government since 1998. A Stafford County Historic Overlay

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District since 1998, Government Island was purchased so that it could be preserved and interpreted as a park for the public to enjoy.

Travelling through marshland connecting Government Island to the mainland, one gets a spectacular view of the marsh areas of Aquia Creek. Once on Government Island, one is then able to traverse this 17-acre island and view the remains of five sandstone quarries, foundation remains of unknown buildings, and the general beauty of this undisturbed landscape. The trails that exist on the island are poorly delineated, yet they provide adequate access throughout the island.

Located throughout Government Island are piles of residual and unused sandstone, yet little infrastructure from the quarrying operations remains, attesting to the simple extractive methods used at this site. The island's undisturbed environment creates a serene landscape defined by its natural setting and historic resources.

Each of the quarries is overgrown with trees and brush, but the sites are discernible because of large outcroppings of stone. At each quarry site, one can view the coloration of the sandstone, as well as the extractive methods used here. Quarry 3 is the best example because the diagonal sash marks are easily visible, as are the trenches and drill holes used to shear off large blocks of sandstone. Land is excavated around the stone outcroppings so that stonecutters could easily access the stone from all directions. Beyond the overgrowth of trees at each quarry site, graffiti is an intrusion on the sandstone quarry faces. At quarries 2 and 3, campfire sites and litter attest to unauthorized usage of the site.

Only one of the original "RS" sandstone markers dating from 1786 remains in situ. Another boundary stone does exist, but has been removed from its original location and shielded from public view. These stones delineated the boundaries of Robert Stuart's one-acre tract, which is located near the western edge of Government Island, west of quarry 3 and south of the remnants of a semi-circular foundation. Although of undetermined use, the foundation indicates the need for archaeological investigation, as do the foundation remnants east of quarry 3, overlooking the remnants of the stone wharf. The foundation for one of these buildings measures approximately 20 feet by 33 feet. The use of this building is undetermined, as are those of the possibly

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two other foundations nearby. The stone wharf is best viewed from the air, Aquia Creek or the southern portion of the island.

The remnants of the stone wharf remain, representing a necessary component of Government Island because stone was shipped to Washington, D.C. and other points by boat. The topography of the southeastern section of the island is more level than the rest of the island, which has led researchers to observe

and record the presence of Native American sites from the Woodland period in this location.²

Government Island consists of a 17-acre island in Aquia Creek whose contributing resources include five quarry sites, two "RS" boundary stones, as well as foundation remains of at least one building, one unknown structure, and a wharf. Government Island is a site that exhibits high degrees of archaeological potential because each quarry site exists as it was left when commercial operations ceased over 170 years ago. Reconnaissance archaeological field investigations indicate the abundance of knowledge to be learned from this site concerning the extractive process of sandstone from the island, the nature of the building remains, worker life on the island, as well as information regarding Native American activity. The island is overgrown and is an undisturbed site full of historic resources. The site is not easily accessible, but Stafford County does have the intention of creating a park here to celebrate the enormous contributions that Government Island made to the founding and building of Washington, D.C. Each of the quarry sites, foundation remains, and boundary stones represent the once vibrant stonecutting operations that occurred here with the specific intention of supplying stone for the public buildings constructed in Washington, D.C.

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ENDNOTES

¹ John C. Van Horne, ed., *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 1805-1810 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 172.

² Michael B. Barber, J. Mark Wittkofski, and Michael F. Barber, *An Archaeological Overview of Stafford County, Virginia* (Roanoke, VA: Preservation Technologies, Inc., 1992), 86.

¹ John C. Van Horne, ed., *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 1805-1810 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 172.

² Michael B. Barber, J. Mark Wittkofski, and Michael F. Barber, *An Archaeological Overview of Stafford County, Virginia* (Roanoke, VA: Preservation Technologies, Inc., 1992), 86.